THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Kingdom of Christmas

December 13, 1998
John M. Buchanan

But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.
Spirit enters flesh
and for all it's worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh.
We may take the view
That its derring-do
Thought of in the large
Is one might charge
On our human part
Of the soul's ethereal
Into the material.

Robert Frost

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE KINGDOM OF CHRISTMAS
December 13, 1998
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11
"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom . . ."
Isaiah 35:1

We come here, dear God, in anticipation and hope for your advent. We come, dear God, longing to know you and to live in your kingdom. We come eager for you; hungry and thirsty for your grace, mercy and love. And we come to know your will for us, listening for your voice. Startle us with your truth and your word, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The December issue of *LIFE* Magazine has a cover article that caught my attention: "When You Think of God What Do You See?" The feature describes, with *LIFE'S* gorgeous pictures, the religious transformation in American culture. We thought we were a Judeo-Christian culture. In fact, we have become, in our own life time, a religiously pluralistic culture. The Muslim population of the United States has risen from two million to six million in twenty years. That is, there are more American Muslims than there are American Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined. There are a million Hindus in America.

Religiously, we have become an extraordinarily diverse culture. We are quite unlike anything else in human history. And when you ask the question, "What do you see when you think of God?" the answer is going to be very different, depending on who is doing the answering.

The essay which accompanies the pictures of different religious groups at worship or engaged in their particular religious ceremonies and liturgies was written by Frank McCourt, author of the best seller, *Angela's Ashes*, the story of McCourt's childhood in Ireland. *Angela's Ashes* is strong, sometimes grim, sometimes very funny, and through it, beginning to end, is McCourt's account of his tortured relationship with the church. It surfaces immediately in the essay:

> "We didn't hear much about a loving God. We were told God is good and that was supposed to be enough. The Irish Catholic God of my memory is an angry God, a vengeful God, a God who'd let you have it upside your head if you strayed, transgressed, coveted. Our God had a stern face. When he wasn't writhing up there on the cross in the shape of his Son, He had His priests preaching hellfire and damnation from the pulpit and scaring us to death."

McCourt recalls:

> "We were told the Roman Catholic Church was the one true church, that outside there was no salvation. Then the collection plate was passed around for foreign missions. If we didn't drop our pennies into the collection those little black babies and yellow babies would burn in hell.

> In all churches there were pictures of God. He usually sat on a throne with angels flying around his head in various stages of undress. And he was stern, merciless. You wouldn't want to come up before him on charges of stealing a bicycle. In two minutes you'd be roaring in the flames of hell, calling for your mother."

McCourt reflects on his first visit to Italy and his delightful observation that if you have to be Catholic, it's much better to be an Italian Catholic than an Irish Catholic. Irish Catholics are always cold and hungry. Italian Catholics live in perpetual sunshine and someone is always bringing them pasta and red wine. Italian Madonnas are voluptuous and dote on their chubby babies. The statues of the Blessed Virgin in Limerick, Ireland, "seemed disembodied. She seemed to be saying, 'Who is this kid?'"

I told a priest friend, an Irishman, what McCourt said, and he said it's true. He said it's true because Irish Catholics spend their whole lives in the rain.

"When You Think of God What Do You See?" The answer depends on who is doing the answering. For Christians, the answer has everything in the world to do with the man who, we believe, was the perfect revelation of God. God, for us, is not a philosophic abstraction or a theological proposition. If you want to know what God is, look at Jesus, the Palestinian Jew from Nazareth. "When You Think of God What Do You See?" The Christian answer is Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One, the Word made flesh.

But even that affirmation can be and often is conditioned and shaped by culture, social customs, political ideology. In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey reports that, "the Lakota tribe refers to Jesus as the buffalo calf of God." The Cuban government distributes a poster of Jesus with a carbine slung over his shoulder. And athletes have their own peculiar Christology. Norris Evans, former Miami Dolphins lineman, wrote in his book, *On God's Squad*, "I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played the game" (see *Homiletics*, December 1998, p. 60).

"When You Think of God What Do You See?" And what does Jesus have to do with it? The question came up, actually both questions, one time in a particularly poignant moment in Jesus' life. His cousin, John, the same age, son of old Zechariah and Elizabeth, had become a kind of religious revolutionary, he joined a sect group, lived in the desert, was a fiery and compelling preacher who invited people to step into the waters of the Jordan River to symbolize their cleansing from sin and spiritual rebirth in baptism. On one incredible day Jesus himself went out to hear John and himself stepped into the water of the river. It was a day of decision for him. But now, John was in King Herod's infamous prison down by the Dead Sea. He had stepped over a line by publicly criticizing the King for having an affair with his brother's wife. He's in prison and he's going to die, and he knows it, and he sends word to Jesus and asks a question, "Are you the one? Are you the messiah, God's anointed, God's promised redeemer?"

What happened to John? What happened to his fire and his faith, his certainty that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the long-awaited messiah? I think there are two answers. One, John is in prison. He's miserable physically, emotionally, spiritually. He's demeaned and debilitated and dehumanized as only prison can do to a person: a number, a statistic, an unfortunate anomaly which human society punishes, ignores, forgets, then eliminates. And so he begins to doubt his own core convictions, the veracity of his own commitment.

Maybe, after all, it isn't true. Maybe Jesus is just another idealistic visionary, inspiring, but ultimately unimportant. Maybe he isn't the one.

The second reason for John's question is tougher. The fact is, Jesus isn't acting like the messiah John expects, longs for, and deeply desires. John wants a messiah who denounces sin, carries out final judgment, lays the ax to the trees, and burns every tree that does not bear fruit (Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching*, p. 26).

Instead, Jesus is teaching in the synagogues, preaching good news, healing the sick, encouraging the discouraged, welcoming outcasts and outsiders. He is not doing much tree burning and judging and excluding. He is not turning out to be what John expected.

"Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them,"...Jesus says. Go tell John the ancient promise, the real promise, is being fulfilled...

In Psalm 146 which we read this morning. God is described as a

- doer of justice
- giver of bread
- liberator of prisoners
- opener of blind eyes
- watcher of the homeless

Go tell John it's happening! The gorgeous prophecy of Isaiah, our first lesson, describes the coming of God's messiah as so radical a transformation that the blind will see, the lame will walk, even the desert will be transformed—the crocus will bloom abundantly. Isaiah's vision of the impact of God's coming is poignant:

> "Strengthen the weak hands,
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> 'Be strong, do not fear.'"

John wants a messiah who will proclaim God's judgment and act on it. Jesus is spending his time restoring, healing, teaching, giving life to the lifeless. John wants a messiah who will root out sin. Jesus is identifying with, proclaiming God's grace to people with weak hands and shaky knees; Jesus is more concerned about people who are needy and afraid.

Not everybody wants that kind of messiah, then or now. If you had occasion to watch and listen to media and public commentary, on the House Judiciary Committee proceeding you witnessed how deeply we want immorality to be condemned and punished regardless of its impact on the government, the nation, or the world.

One New Testament scholar comments, "Seeing and hearing that Jesus is preoccupied with people who have been marginalized by their situations, who can do little or nothing for themselves, may represent a threat to some and prevent them from accepting Jesus as messiah. Like John, they expect that the messiah should be doing more about stopping

crime and condemning immorality and punishing criminals. They would prefer to wait for another, in hopes of finding a leader more to their liking." (Courson, p. 27).

All over the Christian world today people are hearing the story of John the Baptist in prison, his question to Jesus, "Are you the one?" and Jesus' answer, "Tell John what you hear and see." All over the world, just 12 days before Christmas, Christian people are thinking about a fundamental question, "Is he the one?"

His own answer reminds me that who he is is documented and authenticated not in brilliant sermons, academic arguments, or even carefully orthodox creeds; not in lovely worship; not in cultural customs and seasonal celebrations; but in the transformation of the world and of our lives which his birth affects. The Kingdom of Christmas I have called it: the reign of God to which Jesus referred John. That's how Jesus would answer the question "what do you see when you think of God?"

A kingdom, first, of radical hope...where even nature is transformed and the dry desert blossoms. People who know that the baby born in Bethlehem is God's promised Messiah and that his life in history changes everything are people of radical and beautiful hopefulness who simply are never defeated by life. The Kingdom of Christmas is a place where crocus bloom in the desert. What a wonderful image that is.

The late Professor Joseph Sittler of the University of Chicago Divinity School was my favorite. Near the end of his life, he wrote a little book, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, which included an essay, "I Still Plant Trees."

> "If the object of Christian hope is God," Sittler wrote: "it will have to be in virtue of God's strange ways." Sittler was no ivory tower utopian. He wrote:
> "I do not think we are in a very good situation historically. For instance, I do not believe that our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better until it gets catastrophically worse. Our record indicates that we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destruction if there is a profit on the way—and that seems to be what we are doing. I have no great expectation that human cussedness will somehow be quickly modified and turned into generosity or that humanity's care of the earth will improve much. But I do go around planting trees on the campus." (p. 97).

Even the desert will blossom. The Kingdom of Christmas is a place of undying hopefulness and stubborn resistance and determined hard work where old men plant trees they will never see mature; where young mothers battle through the tremendous ardors of chemotherapy and somehow continue to care for their children. The Kingdom of Christmas is a place where men and women stand up in the middle of addiction and change their lives and start each day at 7:30 a.m. in a church basement with a group of fellow-addicts. The Kingdom of Christmas is a place where a Cabrini-Green teenager goes to school and doesn't get pregnant, and in a cold apartment, with an empty stomach, studies algebra and poetry and history. The Kingdom of Christmas is a place where men and women live courageously into the future.

The Kingdom of Christmas is a place where a young man with AIDS gets out of bed and downs a cocktail of very potent drugs that is keeping him alive, gets dressed and goes to work or to seminary as if everything is o.k., which, in a way, it is.
The Kingdom of Christmas is an aging women in this busy city, alone, who wonders how it all came to this and how she's going to live without family and friends, and somehow carries on.

It's a couple whose marriage is in trouble and the passion and delight that brought them together have dissipated somehow and there's not much left and yet they hold on and hold each other and do the hard, demanding work of rebuilding and renewing.

And it is a place where the marginalized are brought back into the family, where the lifeless are given their lives back.

Who are they? They may be us. They are, someone said, "All those whose lives are overwhelmed by fear, timidity, vulnerability, lack of a capacity to live a full life—anything that prevents living effectively and joyously." (*Texts for Preaching*, p. 20).

When I knew this text was coming up I asked Kevin Olson to tell me how our Social Service Center, in the name of this transforming faith of ours, deals with the most marginalized among us, the homeless.

Kevin wrote the following:

> "The man was about 35 years old. He was homeless. He was often found by Social Service Center staff in the morning lying in the cloisters, or on the manse steps, or on the sanctuary steps sleeping or idling the time away. He was dirty, confused, and disheveled. He spoke about aliens chasing him or seeking to harm him or threatening to hurt him. He lived in street, eating out of garbage cans - occasionally begging for money.
>
> Fear seemed to be a constant companion. As near as anyone knew he was like this for five years.
>
> Slowly be began to trust the staff and our Social Service Center became a source of friendship, food, fresh clothing, and connection with people able to help.
> After a harsh winter, the man finally accepted an offer to see a doctor about his medical condition. The Center staff took him to the doctor's office where the man received a diagnosis and treatment for serious, but treatable, mental illness. After several weeks of care the man suddenly remembered that he had a sister who lived in New York City. He thought he remembered her telephone number.
>
> Miraculously, the telephone call connected and his sister answered the telephone. She had not seen him for five years and thought he was dead. She called the man's parents in Kansas City.
>
> The family was reunited with their lost son and brother that weekend."

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the dead are raised."

John asked his question from a prison cell, in a situation of profound weakness and helplessness. And I thought about another prisoner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote a letter to his parents from his cell in a Nazi prison on December 17, 1943. "For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I dare say it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in the prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name." (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 77-78).

I like to think that when John the Baptist got to thinking about Jesus' answer, how in him the presence of God, the hope of God, the power of God, the love of God were present in the life of the world and in the lives of individuals—I like to think that when John pondered that, he also experienced what the ancient prophet promised:

> "Strengthen the weak hands
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart
> 'Be strong, do not fear!'"

And I like to think that it made all the difference in the world to John for whatever life he had left. And that John lived proudly and strongly and purposefully - to the day he died. And I like to think, on this third Sunday of Advent, that you and I might hear is that word addressed to us.

Our prisons are not as dramatic as John's or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, but they are real and they confine, depress, and discourage; prisons of dullness and loneliness and life without passion or purpose; prisons of grief or guilt or self-hatred; prisons of anger and resentment.

It doesn't take much imagination to translate images of blindness and lameness into contemporary realities. And it is not all that far from actual homelessness to a wandering, drifting, meandering through life without a sense of purpose or permanence.

And who among us does not know what weak hands and feeble knees feel like?

And to each of us in the remaining days of Advent comes a quiet but insistent word heard over the din and noise and bustle: God's love is for real. God's grace and forgiveness and power have come to live among us.

To each of us, in the days of Advent, comes the answer to John's question:

> Yes—yes, thanks be to God. He is the one.
>
> "And the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.
> The desert shall rejoice and blossom
> like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
> and rejoice with joy and singing."
> Thanks be to God. Amen